*328. [The Questioner (Dr. Akhilesh Das) was absent. For answer *vide* page 36 *infra*.]

*329. [The Questioners (Shri Amar Singh and Shri Abu Asim Azmi) were absent. For answer *vide* page 37 and 38 *infra*.]

Amendment of Indian Post Office Act, 1898

*330. SHRI C. P. THIRUNAVUKKARASU: Will the Minister of COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government propose to amend the Indian Post Office Act, 1898 to open postal sector to private operators;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether it is a fact that the western countries have not opened up their own postal services; and

(d) if so, the reason for privatisation of the postal services?

THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (SHRI ARUN SHOURIE): (a) to (d) A Statement is laid on the Table of the House.

Statement

(a) and (b) Indian Post Office (Amendment) Bill, 2002 has been introduced in the Lok Sabha on 17.5.2002 to bring about qualitative improvement in the services with more customer friendly features. Under the Indian Post Office Act, 1898 exclusive privilege of conveying letters only is reserved to the Government. This privilege is sought to be retained with the Department in the Indian Post Office (Amendment) Bill, 2002.

(c) No, Sir. Some western countries have opened the postal sector while reserving their exclusive privilege in respect of certain products and services. The position varies from country to country.

(d) There is no proposal as yet to privatise postal services.

'SHRI C. P. THIRUNAVUKKARASU: Mr. Chairman, Sir, my question was: Are you going to privatise the postal service? The reply should have been that there is no proposal to privatise the postal service, or,

there is a proposal to privatise the postal service. But in the reply it is mentioned, 'there is no proposal as yet to privatise the postal service.' Already, an amendment of section 4 of the Act has been sought. Section 4(a) of the Postal Service Act stipulates the conditions for introducing courier services. So, it paves the way for privatisation.

SHRI ARUN SHOURIE: Sir, there is complete confusion. There is no proposal at all, at the moment, to privatise any of the post offices. The question, as we understood it, was about this sector as a whole. In many cases, sectors are opened up. The banking sector has been opened up, but no nationalised bank has been privatised. Similarly, with the introduction of courier services, the first element of transmitting parcels etc. by private sector is coming. It is only with reference to that. As far as the rest of the Postal Service Departments are concerned, they continue as they are.

Sir, the question is, actually, about amendment of the Indian Post Office Act, not privatisation, On this, the amendment of section 4 is only to enable—because as of now there are only about 2,300 courier companies in India, they are completely unregulated—many things, which even agencies of Government for intelligence purposes or for the purpose of prevention of crime require, but can't be extended to them because of the 1898 Act. For that reason, amendment of section 4 was among the amendments suggested, and it is before the Standing Committee. When the Standing Committee comes back to us, we will inform the House.

SHRI S. VIDUTHALAI VIRUMBI: Mr. Chairman, Sir, it is a very important question pertaining to three lakh ED employees. Sir, it is a postal service, it is not a commercial enterprise, to think about profits and losses. It is a service-oriented organisation. Now, I am informed that an order has been issued by the Department of Posts to close down the Branch Offices which incur losses. If it is so, then all these three lakh ED employees will be left without jobs. I want to know whether the Government would give a categorical assurance to the postal employees working in the Branch Offices, especially, the ED employees, who are around three lakh, about their job security.

The second part of my supplementary is this. I would like to know whether the Government would come forward to have a joint council meeting with the leaders of the recognised labour unions so as to settle this issue amicable. This is my pertinent and direct question.

SHRI ARUN SHOURIE: Sir, I completely agree with the Member that the Postal Service is a social obligation of the Government. In fact, in one of the things that is proposed, and our hon. Member was also mentioning about amendments, the purpose is to retain in Government hands the sole monopoly for delivery of letters. So, this question of closing down uneconomic branches, I will, certainly, go into that matter. I have just started studying the subject. But the real viability is going to come by modernising our post offices so that they become communication hubs, and other services can be added on, and provided through the postal service to the postal department also. I will just give one example and then sit down. For example, a postman has been given a mobile phone, which is not available in the village. When he goes to a village, that village gets connected. So, these are very popular services. This kind of services will be added on. I am discussing with the Telecom Department, the Postal Department and the Information Technology Department, all the three together, as to how to strengthen post offices, in general. As far as the last point is concerned, I am just told that there is no order to close the post offices. It is only to relocate them in needy areas. That will not require any job to be lost.

SHRI S. VIDUTHALAI VIRUMBI: Sir, actually, it is just like closing down the office in a different manner. Will the hon. Minister go through that order and let me know the position?

SHRI ARUN SHOURIE: I will certainly do that.

*331. [The Questioner (Shri Vijay J. Darda) was absent. For answer *vide* page 38 *infra*.]

Import of Palmolien

*332. SHRI BACHANI LEKHRAJ:†
PROF. ALKA BALRAM KSHATRIYA:

Will the Minister of CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOOD AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION be pleased to state:

(a) whether allocation of RBD Palmolein for distribution through PDS has been stopped;

†The question was actually asked on the floor of the House by Shri Bachani Lekhraj.